

Editorial 4 - *The Reading Loft* – Creating Picture Images – A Beneficial Life Skill

Reading Your Mind

Hermann A. Peine, Ph.D.

Consider the following lines from *The Education of Little Tree* by Forrest Carter. Read them aloud, then close your eyes, and reflect on the images you have created.

"This day, Granpa was laying on the bank and had already pulled a catfish out of the water. I couldn't find a fish hole, so I went a ways down the bank. I lay down and eased my hands into the water, feeling for a fish hole. I heard a sound right by me. It was a dry rustle that started slow and got faster until it made a whirring noise.

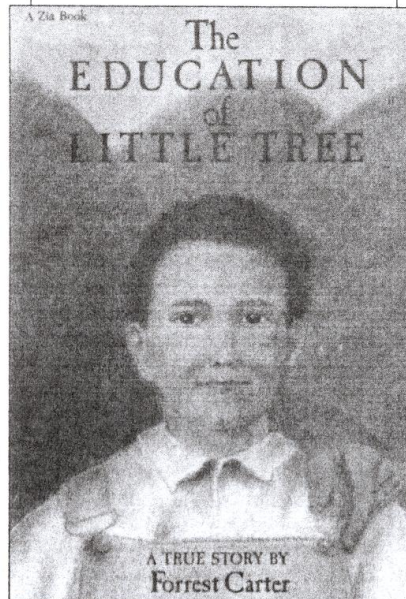
"I turned my head toward the sound. It was a rattlesnake. He was coiled to strike, his head in the air, and looking down on me, not six inches from my face. I froze stiff and couldn't move. He was bigger around than my leg and mad. Me and the snake stared at each other. He was flicking out his tongue --nearly in my face-- and his eyes was slitted--red and mean.

"The end of his tail began to flutter faster and faster; making the whirring sound get higher. Then his head, shaped like a big V, begun to weave just a little, back and forth, for he was deciding what part of my face to hit. I knew he was about to strike me but I couldn't move.

"A shadow fell on the ground over me and the snake. I hadn't heard him coming at all but I knew it was Granpa. Soft and easy, like he was remarking about the weather, Granpa said, 'Don't turn yer head. Don't move, Little Tree. Don't blink yer eyes.' Which I didn't. The snake raised his head higher, getting ready to hit me. I thought he would not stop raising up.

"Then, of a sudden, Granpa's

big hand come between my face and the snake's head. The hand stayed there. The rattler drew up higher. He begun to hiss, and rattled a solid whirring sound. If Granpa had moved his hand . . . or flinched, the snake would have hit me square in the face. I knew it too.



"But he didn't. The hand stayed steady as a rock. I could see the big veins on the back of Granpa's hand. There was beads of sweat standing out too, shining against the copper skin. There wasn't a tremble nor a shake in the hand.

"The rattler struck, fast and hard. He hit Granpa's hand like a bullet; but the hand never moved at all. I saw the needle fangs bury up in the meat as the rattler's jaws took up half his hand.

"Granpa moved his other hand, and grabbed the rattler behind the head, and he squeezed. The rattler come up off the ground and wrapped himself around and

around Granpa's arm. He thrashed at Granpa's head with his rattling end, and beat him in the face of it. But Granpa wouldn't turn loose. He choked that snake to death with one hand, until I heard the crack of backbone. Then he threw him on the ground."

What did you visualize in your mind? Judge your own reaction. Were the images clear or were they diffused? Did personal experiences of snakes enter the imagery? Did you picture a stream familiar to you? Were you aware of weather conditions, temperatures, time of day and was the scene in color or was it black and white? Did you visualize yourself in the scene, one of your children, or someone else familiar to you. The questions can go on and on, and all the answers will reflect something about you and your past experiences in forming picture images in your mind. This ability, or lack of it, forms the subject matter of this discussion.

The fact is that many individuals in our culture have a difficult time in forming picture images. Dan Fader (*The New Hooked on Books*) in a talk given at a 1978 C.E.E. luncheon enhances this observation with a message even more relevant today than it was a decade ago.

"My student's rhetoric has changed so deeply, that I can now describe them as people who do not use picture language to talk to me or to themselves when they write as once they did. Images of action and thought are remarkable by their absence from their prose. To put it another and far more personal way, a child once wrote to me in the mid 60's, 'My Momma,

she tell me not to go out when she leave to go to work, because it cold outside and windy and I afraid to turn on the gas because it explodes sometime, and so I get in her bed and pull up the covers and I listen to that wind blow that tree against that house like Willie Mays, he hitting it with a bat." Willie Mays had one of the most violent, controlled baseball swings anybody has ever seen. It was one of the most extraordinary fiscal acts I have ever stood next to. You could hear his wrists pop as he swung without hitting the ball.

When that kid wrote that to me, I suddenly understood the depth of his fear and how he felt in that wind storm, when that tree hitting the house like Willie Mays hitting it with a bat. My students, wherever I find them, whatever their rhetoric and whatever their dialogue, do not write to me that eloquent way anymore. Their language is as absent of picture that they make as I think their lives are absent of those same pictures. I think that what has happened to students is that for the first time in the history of education in any country that anyone knows about, that we have students, you and I, that have unexercised imaginations.

That they are truly the product of a world which supplies them with their images, truly the product of a world which averages six hours and fifteen minutes in 1977 in North American homes with the television set on, that when they graduate from high school they have seen an average of 18,000 hours of television, having spent more time watching television than they have done anything else but sleep. I believe that they are different from you

and me. They are not better and they are not worse. But they are radically, I mean the word literally, they are at their roots, different from you and me. And not to know that, is to teach their ghosts, is to teach their predecessors, is to teach people who no longer inhabit our classrooms and as far as I can tell, which is not very far, will never again inhabit our classroom in quite the same way they once did."

There is hope in the observation that the majority of adults have a negative reaction to animated movies of such stories as *The Hobbit* or *Lord of the Rings*. The images created in one's own mind when reading a story are almost always of better quality than those produced by committee in Hollywood.

With hope in each individual's image making capacity I use this ability in therapy. Patients often require training in this skill, for the future is a scary unknown with little hope. What is hope, but the ability to "see" a better tomorrow. Too many people are caught up in the feverish race of everyday living to step back, meditate and reflect. Thoreau has stated that "Life is more wonderful than convenient." The visualizing of the wonderful often escapes people, the focus is on the inconvenient.

Picturing rewarding outcomes is one means of setting up a positive self-fulfilling cycle. The likelihood of a positive outcome increases as the person has the positive image in front of them.

Dale Carnegie was very correct with his principle of positive thinking, it just becomes more powerful when such thinking is coupled with positive image making. As an example consider

the situation of an upcoming party in your home. You are the host scurrying around to make everything perfect. You worry about this and that detail to the extent of losing the joy of the preparation. A helpful step would be to imagine your party going beautifully and you being at ease as you do the preparation.

Cognitive role rehearsal forms the basis of many self-help and self-conditioning procedures. Some people find they have negative reactions to many life situations. Phobias, anxieties, and apprehensions may cloud a realistic appraisal of such events. People avoid these situations and attempt to minimize contact. Through the process of projecting oneself into such circumstances an individual can visualize positive outcomes and create a counter-conditioning process.

By repeated trials people can actually eliminate anxiety reactions to the imagined phobic situation. The more comprehensive the image making ability, the more likely the potential for effective self-help through such cognitive rehearsal. Unfamiliar situations can also be imagined and better performances obtained when the real life situation is encountered.

The primary tools for building experiences in the image making process is through dreams, meditation, reflection, listening to audio tapes of stories, and the literature experience of childhood and youth. The experience with books in image making has the double positive outcome of not only enhancing cognitive self-help skills, but also enriching the beauty of the reading experience in adulthood.

